

## Face the challenge

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Israel is on the edge of a strategic tipping point regarding practically every item on its national security agenda: nuclear armament, long-range alliances with like-minded states in the region, cooperation with the international community, its partnership with the United States, and its nation-building relationship with the Palestinians.

Some of these issues are ongoing, while the time frame for the crystallization of others converges around the US's planned withdrawal from Iraq. Whether this process begins in the first quarter of 2008, as the Baker-Hamilton report foresees, or not, is less relevant to Israel's planning than the actual political developments in the Middle East that will surround the exit from Iraq. These developments may prove to be the most significant challenge to Israel's strategic thinking in the country's history.

Israel's leaders appear supremely unprepared for this challenge. In the military, political and diplomatic contexts Israelis are becoming increasingly aware of how stripped down, if not naked, the emperor has become.

So how should our leaders prepare for the fundamental shifts that are likely to occur in the region as the US prepares to leave Iraq?

FIRST, IT is essential that they grasp that the challenges are systemic and comprehensive. The war in Lebanon brought into sharp relief the dynamic of the "resistance network": that is, the phenomenon of interconnected strategy and tactics of a variety of state and non-state actors - Iran, Syria, Lebanon, Hizbullah, Hamas and others - which cooperate at many levels in order to delegitimize and eventually eliminate Israel.

The looming presence of Iran as initiator of the resistance network's activities, marked by its nuclear threat and Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's anti-Israeli rhetoric, has transformed a proxy dynamic into an existential threat extremely difficult to counter. Israel can make headway against this threat only by dealing systemically and decisively with all elements of the network.

Secondly, Israeli decision-makers must look beyond the pat assessments that the US's regional influence has deteriorated in the wake of its Iraqi debacle and its neglect of the Palestine-Israel conflict. The issue goes much deeper.

The US, together with its allies in the fight against global jihad, world terrorism and other forces that oppose democratization, is well on its way to losing the battle for mobilization of the democratic West against these threats.

THAT THIS battle has been lost in Iraq is widely acknowledged. Yet the most salient expression of this new reality is occurring in Afghanistan.

At a recent NATO summit meeting on the future deployment of the Afghanistan Stabilization Force, only four out of 26 NATO countries that were committed to the force agreed to direct military engagement with the Taliban: the US, Britain, the Netherlands and Canada. Other NATO countries have imposed caveats on the use of their troops in the southern areas, where the Taliban inflicts the most casualties.

Moreover, in the Helmand province, where British troops have been fighting Taliban insurgents, the local governor has bypassed Western forces in order to make a separate peace. Mustafa Qazemi, a member of Afghanistan's Parliament who has fought the Taliban, has criticized this development as "a model for the destruction of the country... and just a defeat for NATO." There are now reports of a new Taliban offensive against Kabul being prepared for the spring. The relevance of this emerging pattern for Israel should be crystal clear: When the resolve of Western democracies is tested against the real-time, military challenge of Islamic extremism, it fails.

THIRDLY, Israeli leaders must take a serious look at what we really want to gain from our strategic alliances with the relatively moderate Arab regimes with whom we have peace agreements and implicit understandings.

Areas of potential compromise with these regimes, both territorial and otherwise, should be developed; as should the demands that Israel needs to make of its interlocutors.

Clearly, there is a common interest with Egypt, Jordan, the Gulf states, and possibly North Africa in opposing Iranian-style Islamic extremism. Yet this is not sufficient: Arab states face high domestic costs for allying with Israel.

Thus, Israel must frame common regional interests along an even longer time line. These might include maintenance of a nuclear-free region; development of non-petroleum energy resources together with those countries that are not oil-rich; and the potential for boosting economic prosperity as a result of free trade.

As the US begins to focus on its withdrawal from Iraq, Israel enters an era of challenging strategic decisions that will call into question its continued existence as a Jewish and democratic state.

This situation is discouraging. Our leadership has not undertaken a sufficiently comprehensive planning process. Our Western allies have not demonstrated the necessary resolve for opposing extremist Islam. And Iran is continuing its nuclear armament program, openly declaring its aim of destroying Israel.

On the other hand, the issues confronting Israel's leadership today are a beta version of the threats against the West as a whole: Islamic extremism, Iran's nuclear armament, and the Arab near-monopoly on petroleum energy. The West has every interest in regaining its political and military resolve under renewed leadership, and it may yet be premature to judge the outcomes in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Finally, the world of Islam has its own impending internal crises to handle, the outcomes of which may change the strategic picture for Israel.

WHAT NEEDS to be done? Israel's leadership must initiate a discourse with the leaders of the West, and with China, India, Russia and even South America and parts of Africa. This discourse must focus on the common threat that a nuclear Iran and its sponsorship of world jihad poses to non-Islamic nations as a whole. It must emphasize how the Islamic extremist vision undermines modernism, pluralism and democratic principles.

And Israel must work with these countries on such practical matters as following the money trails which fund terrorism, tracking shipments of spare parts for rocket launchers and identifying terrorist training camps in out-of-the-way locations.

A second discourse, much more discreet, is needed with states in the Middle East that are as threatened as Israel is by Iranian hegemony. The common interests identified above are only the starting point for this connection.

It is long past the time for our leadership to find its clear, decisive voice on these strategic challenges. Israel does not have to lead the charge - but it must find a way to sound the alert.

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